

Reading and Writing Letters In Class

By Mario Rinvoluti

When I was learning modern languages, no one ever showed me a letter written by a live native speaker. The text we got was either stuff from the textbook, specially written for learners, or literary writing. And yet, as an adult, a large part of my reading in other languages comes in the form of letters that need replies of one sort or another.

So let me share with you a couple of preliminary exercises designed to get your students into the habit of looking at letters in English.

Hoovering Language from Letters

If you have an upper-intermediate or advanced class, take in a sheaf of English letters addressed to you and ask the students to read them. Ask them to read them first to get the gist-go round the room helping with language and interpersonal context. Now ask the students to make notes of any words, phrases or chunks of language that the letter-writers use and those they do not. These should be the "easy bits of language" that natives get right and FL speakers often can't assimilate. (I do not mean the hard or technical words.) Give enough time for each student to tackle three or four texts.

When you first do this with students they are amazed at the remarkable trust you are placing in them. Can this teacher really be sharing private letters with us? The texts will be important to them insofar as you are.

If you do not receive many letters in English, borrow a heap from someone who does. The exercise will still work for you, but perhaps less startlingly well.

Unopened Mail

A step further in the area of trust is to take in a pile of unopened mail. Ask the students to open the envelopes, and read through to get the gist. Ask them also to summarise the content in three sentences and to propose a course of action for you.

One of my colleagues, Sheila Levy, likes the idea above but only does it with junk mail addressed to her. She does not feel comfortable doing it with an indiscriminate, uncensored mailbag.

Writing Letters Out from the Classroom

Have you ever had students who were ill or who had to leave your class earlier than the others? Situations like this offer an obvious letterwriting opportunity: Ask your students to write to the person who is away and write one yourself too, suggesting s/he reply. Students in this situation are often bowled over by getting letters from everybody in their class (or former class) and frequently do reply. Let me quote verbatim from one such letter, written by a Spanish university student to her ex-classmates in UK:

Dear Everybody,

**Don't remind you anything this expression? *When I write it I have in mind our class, Mario giving us his letters to everybody. But it might be different for you because you are still there with him. Lucky you!*

*Did you want to kill me? *I broke in tears reading your letters, you are lovely. Actually, you are too lovely for my sensitive heart.*

At first, please let me apologize for my last Friday in England I didn't forget what you had told me about the Pub but...

She wrote the group a carefully thought-out, seven-page letter, and they gave it 20 minutes of rapt attention. I have rarely seen such attentive reading-comprehension work. They knew the writer well, and many of them liked her-a natural, sensible reason for reading.

Political Letters

If you teach students who have an interest in politics, you could follow my colleague, Gerry Kenny, and get them to write, in English, to the protagonist of some major political event. Political observers will sometimes feel very closely connected to great political events. In some cases the students will receive a reply, even if not normally from the person himself/herself.

Literary Letters

Many people have friends who write stories or poems; and if these writers have not yet been published, they tend to be avid for an audience. Take a poem, story (or even a painting) by a friend into class and ask the students to react to it in writing. When I have done this my writer friend has always responded with a "Dear Everybody" response.

Letters Across the Class

Why is so much text in the average language classroom external to the group? The one thing that humans are really very good at producing is, precisely, text. The simplest exercise in the world is tell the students they have 40 minutes in which to write short letters to other people in the room. When you first do this with a group, they find it very odd and they ask understandable, crazy questions like "Who shall I write to?" and "What shall I say to her?" Such questions are both understandable and idiotic. How can the teacher possibly tell a student what she should want to say to her classmate? A good variation of this exercise is to bring two classes together in the same space and ask them to write letters to members of the other group. This can be an excellent way of waking up two sleepy classes.

Writing Half a Letter Each

If the layout of the room will permit, get one half of the class sitting facing the other. Ask each student to identify a letter writing partner in the other half of the class. Ask each student to write a full page letter to their partner. Monitor the class carefully and when most people have written a bit less than half a page, ask them to swap letters with their partners. They finish the letter to themselves, continuing in the vein and style of the partner, writing as their partner, not as they themselves write. The exercise finishes with an oral phase: the partners come together and compare how the one has written the second half of the letter in the role and style of the other.

In Your Moccasins

Do your students ever crave the chance to get up and move in the language class? Here's an exercise for them. Ask them to pair off, and take them to an open space (lawn, gym, hall, passageway). Person A in each pair brings to mind how three different people s/he knows well walk. S/he imitates the way they walk one after another, with Person B walking close behind and copying her/him. Everybody does this at the same time. Then Person B takes a turn with A imitating.

Person A chooses the most interesting walking style portrayed by B and asks B to write a letter of introduction as the person with that way of walking. Then Person B chooses the most interesting walking style that A demonstrated, and A writes a letter as that person.

When the letters have been written, they are exchanged and read. Normally a very animated discussion follows.

Student to Teacher Letter Writing

There are few more linguistically valuable exercises than correspondence between teacher and student. I learnt the technique from one of Herbert Kohl's books years ago: he says it was the only way he found to get inner-city, New York elementary school kids to write bits of meaningful, consecutive English. Working with socially-cohesive Japanese groups gave me the idea that I could have the students write individual letters to me and then I respond with a "Dear Everybody" letter that mostly quoted from their letters. This modification of the Kohl technique gives spectacular results. What is really happening is that the students are writing to each other, but with me as a reformulating, enriching, linguistic filter. Let me show you an example of part of such a letter:

Dear Everybody,

I hope you can make out/decipher my awful/dreadful handwriting Please try/ have a go. Yes, S, I appreciate your problem in describing your Dad: on the one hand he is an angry, fierce person, and on the other hand you love and respect him greatly. I am pleased to learn, S, that you are enjoying this class. I feel good about you too.

So, A, though you have always lived in Croatia, your mother comes from Poland-from Warsaw, to be precise. I find it fascinating/really interesting to discover that you started/founded a youth magazine in your home town. What kind of stuff did you include in it?...

Since this group of students was short on vocabulary and needed to expand it for an upcoming exam, I used my letters to give them plenty of phrases with parallel meaning. Over a term of 11 weeks of intensive language study, the average student wrote me fifteen letters and my responses, recycling their content, provided one of the mainstays of their reading comprehension work. Even relative non-readers are motivated to read about themselves and those round them.

Receiving letters from students has strongly modified my teaching. I find out about tens of things that my students have not previously mentioned when I used only the oral channel. Quite often a student will write something that s/he does not want the rest of the class to know and says so explicitly in the letter. See, for example, this sharp complaint:

**...In my case, I'm just sleeping, you know very well. *But if your class is exciting for me, I could be wake up in your class, but you prefer that you are an observer and I really need a teacher, because I can't understand and remember English by myself. *I deadly need English class...*

To my mind, the exciting thing about the above text is that the writer dares to say things to me that she might well not have dared to say had we not established a kind of writing community in her group.

An Appeal

If you are using letter reading and writing with your students, why not share some of the techniques you are using with other readers of FORUM? It is through these exchanges among practising teachers that EFL methodology moves forward. How many practical, classroom-friendly scenarios have you learnt from the regiment of so called, "applied" linguists in the last five years? Maybe you have been luckier than some of us.

If you have never before used the idea of corresponding in your classroom, try using some of the approaches in this article, and surely you will come up with loads of new ideas, as will your students. Again, please share these with other readers of FORUM. Around the world there is a community of ESL/EFL teachers who use letters with their students and this "club" needs feeding.

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References

- Burbidge, Gray, and Rinvoluceri. Forthcoming. Letters. Oxford University Press.